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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 001954

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SUBJECT: TFIZ01: 99 PROMINENT JORDANIANS LETTER EXHORT KING ABDULLAH TO TAKE TOUGHER STANCE AGAINST IRAQ WAR

Classified By: Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm. Reasons 1.5 (B) and (D)

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) On March 31, Al Arab Al Yawm newspaper published an open letter to King Abdullah, signed by 99 prominent Jordanians, urging the King to toughen his stance against the "U.S. aggression" in Iraq. The letter's signers include former prime ministers, ministers, deputies, former intelligence officers, Islamists, and a communist party leader. The letter requests that the King condemn the "illegitimate aggression" against Iraq and its people and subsequently, after the war has ended, "to refuse to recognize any political or legal outcomes of the aggression." Anxiety about the letter and the gap between public opinion and Iraq policy could spark more declarations from the GOJ on the need to end the war. End Summary

Jordanian Who's Who

¶12. (C) The letter sparked interest both for its content and for its "who's who" of prominent --if historical-- Jordanian political figures. Among the signers are former prime ministers Mudar Badran, Ahmad Obeidat, Taher Masri and Abdur Ra'uf S. Rawabdeh, former Deputy Prime Minister Ayman Majali, Islamist activist Leith Shbeilat, an Islamist sentenced to death for conspiring against the State in 1992, and Yacoub Zayaddine, a veteran communist leader.

Letter's Request to the King

¶13. (C) The letter urges King Abdullah to condemn strongly "the US aggression", citing astonishment at the lack of an official Arab position that "rises to the level of people's conscience." The letter further states that only by standing with Iraq, in its time of need, will Arab governments be able to defend their own legitimacy in light of the American aggression. The letter, goes further by urging the King "to refuse to recognize any political or legal outcomes of the aggression."

Grab bag of Old Tired Issues

¶14. (C) The letter justifies these requests by pulling together a tired set of knee-jerk -- but nonetheless, emotionally powerful -- pan-Arab ideals and East Bank fears: Arab solidarity against "aggression," the need for "international legitimacy" (i.e. the UN), and the fear that Israel harbors plans to expel Palestinians to Jordan. It is also interesting that the letter calls on the King only to "push forward the rising international efforts that seek to condemn the Anglo-American aggression against the land and people of Iraq." It does not suggest support for Saddam Hussein or the Iraqi regime, nor does it call for expulsion of U.S. forces from Jordan (a demand of most anti-war activists).

Letter Causes a Stir at the Palace

¶15. (C) Minister for Palace Affairs Faisal al-Fayez and Planning Minister Bassam Awadallah told the Ambassador separately that the Palace is quite upset by the letter. Fayez was scathing in his attack on the signatories -- saying they each had their own personal agenda and most wanted a job. Although the letter's message will not affect the GOJ's support for our effort, Fayez said, the Palace has to take notice, since "ninety percent" of Jordanians agree with its content. Fayez said those in the Palace are feeling a need to "protect the King," hinting that senior officials may consequently make stronger calls for an end to the war and deplore more loudly the civilian casualties.

They just want the King to remember the past

16. (C) Peace activist and political science professor Mohammed Kheir Mustafa told PolCouns April 1 that the letter represents old-line East bankers' attempt to consolidate opposition to the war with pan-Arab slogans -- and to get the King on board. By contrast, human rights activist Fawsi Samhoury (strictly protect) was uncharacteristically cynical about the letter and those who signed it. He said the group was composed of political has-beens and supporters of the late King Hussein who are now "on the outside." He noted wryly that many of them also have investments in Iraq which might be hurt by a more open political and economic system there.

Comment

17. (C) The letter is a shot across the King's bow by many of his father's closest advisors and political supporters. Its directness and -- in a culture that emphasizes respect for authority -- its rudeness have great shock value. Two of the signers told the press that they hoped to use the letter merely to get the King's attention. More than likely, members of this group no longer command King Abdullah's attention as they once commanded King Hussein's.

18. (C) That said, the letter has the potential to focus opposition to the war, and does point out the great disconnect between popular attitudes to the war and government policy. This makes the King's advisors very nervous, and we are likely to see at least some of them taking a stronger anti-war stance in public to shield themselves and the King from public ire.

GNEHM